

SANCTUARY:

REFLECTIONS ON AN ENGAGED GALLERY WORKING WITH
ASYLUM SEEKER AND REFUGEE COMMUNITIES IN GLASGOW

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INTRODUCING GLASGOW

Glasgow has been a city of many changes throughout its history. It has reinvented itself through necessity and also in response to its economic successes. The city has both welcomed new migrants and immigrants and has also seen large numbers of its citizens leave in search of new opportunities across the world in tough economic times. It is still a city of change, a city of opportunity, a city of innovation and conversely of entrenched hardship and poverty. It has long been the most ethnically diverse city in Scotland and is currently home to the largest number of dispersed asylum seekers in the UK.

Over the last 20 years Glasgow has been undergoing a major change in identity. It is transforming itself from an industrial city struggling to stay alive in a declining manufacturing economy, to a city building a new identity from different economic bases, bolstered by culture, creativity and innovation. It was nominated as European City of Culture in 1990, won the UK City of Architecture and Design in 1999 and will be hosting the 2014 Commonwealth Games. One of the other major changes in the last decade has been the arrival of thousands of people seeking asylum, fleeing politically unstable regimes in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Understanding Glasgow's recent history is important in understanding the role museums, arts and culture play in supporting this dynamic city and the generations of people who have called this 'dear green place' their home. The work described here is illustrative of how museums and culture contribute to a people's identity, sense of well-being and sense of place and, in turn, how they can project the vitality and pride of the city, in a way that allows it to better understand its diverse citizens, (new and established) who create its personality, its history and its future in the midst of challenging demographic and economic changes.

GLASGOW MUSEUMS:

A COMMITMENT TO ENGAGEMENT

Glasgow Museums have a long established commitment to engaging with diverse audiences.

Glasgow Museums is in many ways a unique organisation. It is the largest civic museum service in the UK—with 9 museums and galleries. These include: the Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) a contemporary art gallery in the heart of the city, St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, one of only four museums of religion in the world; a publicly accessible store (archive), the Glasgow Museums Resource Centre; the internationally known Burrell Collection and Glasgow Museums' flagship, Kelvingrove.

The collection is as diverse as it is large—with 1.4 million items. These range from world class collections of fine art to one of the finest arms and armour collections in Europe to natural history, social history, costumes and textiles, transport and technology and world cultures. Over 60% of the collection is of national or international significance according to the Scottish National Audit.

Glasgow Museums receive over 3 million visits per year. Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum is the most visited museum in the UK outside London. All our museums are free to visit and most are open 7 days a week.

Since the 1990s, Glasgow Museums has taken steps to articulate a set of principles to define its relationship with the changing life of the city and its residents. Thus now, at the heart of Glasgow Museums is a fundamental philosophical commitment to the museum as a civic space that facilitates debate and discussion on current and historical issues, beliefs and cultures. As a 'safe' space to express diverse perceptions, ideas, stories and issues, Glasgow Museums offer a forum where awareness is raised and participants are invited to contribute to and shape discussions about the issues, identities, cultures and understandings being stimulated by programmes and exhibitions.



GoMA with Sanctuary banner. External view of GoMA displaying Sanctuary banners
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Sanctuary: the Exhibition. View of Gallery 1. Copyright: Culture and Sport Glasgow (Museums)

In 2003, Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) launched *Sanctuary*, Glasgow Museums' first exhibition and a series of projects that focused on contemporary arts and human rights. *Sanctuary* encompassed GM's rationale and allowed GOMA to participate in the contemporary debate taking place in the city—from an international and local perspective.

WHY WAS SANCTUARY CONCEIVED?

In 2000, Glasgow City Council (GCC) agreed to take up to 10,000 asylum seekers as part of the UK Government's national dispersal programme. The subsequent unrest and protests have been well-documented in the media. Many asylum seekers arriving in the city were housed in areas of multiple deprivation, bringing them together with long standing, often isolated and disenfranchised communities. The public's knowledge and perception of asylum seekers and refugees was very poor and consequently could be easily manipulated by the media. The city was given a shocking wake up call in August 2001 with the tragic murder of a Kurdish asylum seeker in the Sighthill area of the city. With the sharp criticisms of the media's role in fostering a climate of fear and violence towards asylum seekers, this marked a turning point in the coverage of asylum in Scottish media, with an effort to focus less on conflicts and more on their successful integration into communities. In response to the murder, asylum seekers organized protests in the city centre about their treatment in Sighthill and local residents either joined them to display solidarity or they joined the counter-protests about what they perceived to be preferential treatment of asylum seekers and refugees. This highlighted the critical need for the city's key agencies to act strategically and address the issues residents and newcomers were raising.

Sanctuary responded to priorities in Glasgow City Council's (GCC) inclusion strategy, which were established to support the city's commitment to integrating asylum seekers and to understanding Glasgow's increasingly diverse population.

From this context, following pilot work, *Sanctuary* developed as a major Programme with two principal aims:

- *Sanctuary: the Exhibition*—To use a high profile exhibition to raise awareness of the plight of asylum seekers and refugees worldwide, to redress negative media portrayal and local public perception.
- *Sanctuary: the Project*—To offer the new residents access to local (arts) services as afforded to other Glasgow residents, their right as part of the GCC/Central Government dispersal contract.

This was a complex Programme with multiple strands that worked on different levels. The aims and ambitions of the exhibition and projects were high. Underlying these were additional but understated objectives that were more institutional. These included an ambition to be collaborative and interdisciplinary, bringing multiple organisations together to work more effectively with the *Sanctuary Programme's* target audiences. Furthermore, the aim to promote a sense of ownership and the widespread use of the city's cultural resources required fundamental changes in working practice within the participating cultural institutions and partner agencies.

WHO DID GOMA WORK WITH TO PRODUCE SANCTUARY AND WHY?

From the inception of *Sanctuary*, GoMA wanted to work with expert partner agencies. GoMA is a museum and gallery: we are expert in understanding art and objects and how art communicates with and inspires people. We wanted and needed to work alongside people expert in working with asylum seekers and refugees; people who understood the multiple issues and sensitivities. To this end, key partners throughout the development and delivery of the *Sanctuary Programme* were Amnesty International and the Scottish Refugee Council.

In addition to having the right partners, one of the most important lessons we learned in

delivering *Sanctuary*, was that it was essential that GoMA approached future issue-based projects as one team. Discussions that fostered understanding and sensitivity towards the issues explored in the *Sanctuary Programme* had to include the entire gallery team. We had to put in place support systems for everyone, not just the staff leading the project strands, but also the front of house staff, the learning and access teams and the wider management. We had to equip all the staff who would be in the galleries on a daily basis, answering questions, hearing visitors' responses as well as those working directly with participants. We had to be certain staff had the confidence and skills to answer questions. They would have to deal with the entire range of responses that the exhibition could provoke in visitors. In addition, we also needed to allow staff the space and opportunity to express their feelings and responses to the subjects and the life stories that emerged from the exhibitions and projects.

Sanctuary attempted to engage the power of contemporary art to explore and address issues relating to human rights and the plight of asylum seekers and refugees. The exhibit is a testament of the many artists who are passionately concerned with human rights and their abuse. The works selected for this exhibition explored issues such as forced migration, displacement, torture, oppression, identity and concepts of 'home'.

SANCTUARY: THE EXHIBITION

"...an intelligent combination of British and international artists with work which swings from the poignant to the chilling"

- Iain Gale, *Scotland in Sunday*, 13th April 2003

There were 28 artists represented in the main exhibition. These included internationally renowned artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Antony Gormley and Ross Sinclair exhibiting alongside asylum seeker and refugee artists resident in Britain.

Sanctuary: the Exhibition opened 9th April 2003

and ran for 6 months. As a result of the development work taking place simultaneously through *Sanctuary: the Project*, 1,200 people from Glasgow's diverse cultural community attended the private view. Such high attendance figures at an event like this had not been seen since GoMA opened in 1996. Attendance at such an event from such a diverse audience was a first. All information in the exhibition was available in the six key languages recognised as the most popular in Glasgow and was available to all free of charge. This was part of the aim to make these first time attenders to GoMA welcome. Also, throughout the exhibition's run, weekly, free guided tours were offered by the GoMA volunteer guide service.

Sanctuary marked a critical change in GoMA's artistic policy, moving from its earlier, historical focus to a clear statement that it would engage with current arts practice, both in Glasgow and internationally. The exhibition included paintings, photographs, mixed media sculptures and new media works of art and led to the overhaul of major display areas, including the foyer where the 600-kilo Gormley sculpture was suspended.

This stunning piece visually linked all *Sanctuary* exhibition spaces, including the display areas exhibiting the work produced through the outreach project. It also demonstrated to the public the direction of GoMA's ambitious new acquisitions programme.

Visitor figures for the exhibition exceeded 210,000. Front of House staff recorded visitors from more diverse backgrounds than had previously attended. The high profile exhibition encouraged people to inquire about voluntary positions within GoMA's Volunteer Guides and Learning & Access Team.

Strong public support for the exhibition and the issues raised were revealed through a survey conducted in the first month and indicated *Sanctuary* had effected positive attitudinal change in visitors. Below is just a sample of the comments visitors made:

'It is a bit difficult to write in English, but I will try. I found Sanctuary a very, very good exhibition. I feel myself sad and peaceful at the same time. With the music and photographs of where people were killed by the IRA. It is important that art serves a cause.'

'It is good to see the city involving everybody about the issues of immigration etc. This is helpful in sympathising with and understanding these situations, instead of ignoring them. Helps deal with them in a positive way.'

'Shock, anger, horror, despair, hope, inspiration and admiration.'

'Glad to see art being made relevant to contemporary life.'

In addition to the main exhibition there was a separate exhibition selling artwork in GoMA, which raised funds for Amnesty International and the Scottish Refugee Council. This show was the first of its kind in GoMA and included work from *Sanctuary* artists, local and nationally established artists and celebrities.

Whilst *Sanctuary: the exhibition* brought major international works together to highlight the power and relevance of contemporary art in dealing with global issues, *Sanctuary: the Project* used the arts to explore and highlight issues facing people seeking asylum in Glasgow, who had fled intolerable situations in their former homelands..

SANCTUARY: THE PROJECT

"I learned lots of things...saw lots of things... we can draw more things...we wanted to come again it was very fun. Thank you."

- Sohrab, participant in outreach workshops, January-March 2003

Sanctuary: the project began 6 months before the opening of *Sanctuary: the exhibition* and continued for 6 months after. The *Sanctuary Programme* structure was designed this way for 3 reasons:

- It allowed GoMA to establish relationships

with the community and strengthen its partnerships with the relevant agencies working directly with these communities in preparation for *Sanctuary: the Exhibition*

- New work developed by participants could be shown alongside the international show—with equal value and equal status.
- It allowed GoMA to continue relationships with these new audiences after *Sanctuary: the Exhibition* closed, with the intention that this would strengthen the relationship between this new audience and the gallery.

By the time *Sanctuary: the Project* had finished, artists had run over 120 visual art workshops with 14 projects across the city that supported the 'new Glaswegians'. When the first exhibition of work from the outreach projects opened in GoMA over 80 participants, including members of their families, attended the Private View, which was held jointly with the main exhibition. A website was also created from the projects and was linked to the Museum's website until May 2010.

WHO GOT INVOLVED?

GoMA used various methods to encourage the participation of new Glaswegians and develop new partnerships. We advertised the project activities through leaflets in 6 key languages and distributed them through local networks and by contacting appropriate community and voluntary organisations. The partnerships were also developed through existing contacts developed through earlier work by the Open Museum (Glasgow Museums outreach service), Arts Development, Libraries and locally based community focused services such as Youth Services.

Sanctuary: the Project workshops attracted over 300 people aged between 3 and 60+. Those participating came from over 20 different countries. Many participants were able to attend a complete block of 6 or 12 workshops and created new work, which was exhibited alongside the major exhibition

and at other venues across the city, such as libraries, community halls, and local arts centres.

GoMA worked with Glasgow-based contemporary visual artists to develop the workshops, which were designed around the interests and needs of participants. The artists were selected based on their arts practice as well as their experience of working with diverse communities.

THE WORKSHOPS

The workshops took place in accessible venues, local to where people lived, (such as libraries, community halls, recreation rooms in housing estates). This emphasis on local venues was an important aspect of the project as participants were unfamiliar with the city. In addition, there were a number of restrictions they faced around access to travel, childcare and communication if they were not fluent in English. Thus in response, we ensured that the cost for transportation and interpreters were provided when requested.

People participating in the six-week block of workshops also visited GoMA or another Glasgow Museum as part of this strand of the programme. Participants highlighted this as one of the best things in the project. This was the first step in encouraging this new audience to continue to develop their relationship with GoMA and other cultural resources in the city. Glasgow Museums and GoMA have sustained this access through the programmes delivered through our Learning and Access Teams, both in museum and gallery venues and through outreach projects, and through our on-going commitment to participatory public programming and exhibitions. We continue to work collaboratively with partner agencies and organisations to develop and sustain new audiences' participation.

SANCTUARY AND THE CITY

From April to September 2003, *Sanctuary* presented, or was involved in, over 40 multi-genre arts events across Glasgow across many different cultural venues.

These events were attended by more than 900 people and included music performances, storytelling sessions, dance and performance events, visual art exhibitions and workshops. Monthly leaflets and newsletters, detailing events and project news were distributed through the *Sanctuary* mailing list and GoMA.

Sanctuary: the Project also developed a number of partnerships with external organisations, such as Sharmanka Gallery, Cranhill Community Project, Greater Easterhouse Arts Team, the Visual Arts Project, Tramway (contemporary visual arts and performance centre), The Arches Theatre, Artists in Exile and the YMCA, Glasgow.

A LEGACY FOR ARTISTS AND A LEGACY FOR THE CITY

As well as aiming to engage with Glasgow's new asylum seeker and refugee communities, *Sanctuary: the Project* also developed an artists' initiative, which was open to new arrivals and Glasgow based artists. We recognized that to support the new activities and initiatives introduced by *Sanctuary*, infrastructure and resources were needed if artists and institutions were to develop the capacity to fund and run their own programmes and projects over time.

Working with two core partners, Glasgow's Arts Development team and The Arches (a city-centre performance venue and theatre company) GoMA held a conference for asylum seeker and refugee artists of all disciplines. The conference purpose was to explore the possibility of a sustainable network with and for artists in Glasgow.

The conference was held soon after *Sanctuary: the Exhibition* closed and was facilitated by London-based organization, Artists in Exile, who provided four facilitators to speak and run workshops. Over 70 people attended the two days; this included 15 asylum seeker and refugee artists, a high percentage for such an event.

One outcome was a Glasgow 'Artists in Exile' group formed and continued to meet over the next

18 months. The group secured funding for the subsequent 3 years from Creative Scotland and Glasgow City Council to continue to provide support and opportunities for artists new to the city.

Then in 2006/7, the 'Arts, Asylum Seekers and Refugees Strategy Group' was established by the Scottish Refugee Council and Culture and Sport Glasgow (now Glasgow Life) to address the need for joint planning and the need to share practices for supporting and working with asylum seekers across the city. The main drive for this came from the Glasgow 'Artists in Exile' Arts Officer, Fiona McDougall, who was employed by Culture and Sport Glasgow.

That year, the strategy group undertook a mapping exercise of existing activities across the city. This provided a snapshot of provision for artists and confirmed that there was a range and variety of activities taking place in Glasgow. However, this activity often operated in isolation from other projects and organisations and the value of discussing and sharing each organization's growing body of knowledge and effective practices was recognized through this mapping exercise.

Funding for a dedicated officer to support Glasgow's 'Artists in Exile' has now ended, but this group continues as an independent organisation/collective of artists.

The strategic grouping has now renamed itself as iCAN (inter-cultural arts network). The core group includes Scottish Refugee Council, Glasgow Life, Street Level, Glasgow Media Access Centre, Paragon, Confab and Glasgow Storytellers. The main purpose of iCAN is to provide support for artists and organisations involved in work with asylum seekers and refugees and provide a focal point for the variety of work across the city. Ongoing dialogue in the form of meetings is still in demand. Organisations continue to come along to iCAN meetings to hear news about other projects and get informal support from the group.

iCAN began from an identified need for collective and strategic direction around the many arts projects taking place, many of which were unaware or unconnected with each other. iCAN meetings are currently about sharing and discussion with the intention of opening up opportunity for collaboration, chances to look at examples of best practice and overall strengthening the 'sector' and supporting the work. For example, one difficulty that regularly arose in discussions was around boundaries and legalities. To address this, iCAN produced a best practice guide to help other projects avoid some of the difficulties faced previously. You can find this and other examples in the case studies section on the iCAN website, both of which were launched at an event at Trongate 103 in autumn 2009. For more information see www.icanetwork.org.uk

Glasgow Life continues to support iCAN by chairing the group and funding the network meetings through Glasgow Arts team. iCAN is now widening its reach by holding regular network meetings open to all. These meetings are hosted by partners across the city and the network is collaborating with Refugee Week UK as they develop a national network via a UK-wide website and two conference events. This active network has grown from continued collaborative working by Glasgow's cultural agencies and partners.

Other resources also developed as a result of the *Sanctuary Programme* and contribute to shared learning and best practice in different ways. In order to give a flavour of the work involved in *Sanctuary*, a CD-ROM was created which archives the many facets of the project. This has been available in all Glasgow libraries and from GoMA since March 2004. One of the outreach projects created a human rights map of the world that was added to the Open Museum outreach resources that community groups can borrow from Glasgow Museums.

These resources and the artist networks form the legacies of the fifteen-month *Sanctuary* programme.

The links generated between artists, communities, organisations and individuals through *Sanctuary* have created access to the extensive range of museums collections and arts resources available in the city and are meant to ensure that the enthusiasm and skills developed through the project are not lost. Glasgow Museums continues to work across the city with Glasgow's diverse communities—new and long standing both through the museums' permanent programming in venues and outreach as well as through new projects. One of these new projects, *Curious: exploring stories, cultures and ideas in a changing city* is an ambitious 3 year programme led by Glasgow Museums, funded by Legacy Trust UK and Scottish Arts Council to enhance Glasgow's cultural and volunteering programme supporting 2012 Olympics and the lead up to 2014 Commonwealth Games.

Curious has as its core theme a celebration of Glasgow's cultural diversity—historically and in the contemporary. It uses the museums collections as a stimulus to re-interpret and add new perspectives to our collective understanding of Glasgow's cultural heritage and what being Glaswegian means. *Curious!* is working with multiple agencies (such as local colleges, integration networks, voluntary and community partners, education services, youth services) to engage with communities across Glasgow. The project aims to provide a platform for intercultural dialogue within the city.

"*Curious*" has four main strands:

1. A year-long exhibition exploring themes of cultural diversity, in St Mungo's Museum of Religious Life and Art, running from August 2011, accompanied by a schools and events programme.
2. A training programme in cultural diversity based on objects from the museum collections and the experiences of diverse communities living in Glasgow.

These are underpinned by

3. A programme of community engagement

which will include faith groups and Glasgow's new communities, as well as longer-standing communities.

We'll capture and pass on our learning, including through

4. A conference in 2012 with international delegates reflecting on the impact of sporting and cultural events

The community engagement programme has been running since April 2009—the core part of this work has been to introduce the project themes, and work with volunteer participants (young people and adults) from Glasgow's new and established communities. A core group of these participants have now explored the museum stores (archives), and selected museum objects (supported by their interpretation and perspectives) for the 2011 exhibition. In addition, the project has also been working with partners to research and design the cultural diversity training programme. To follow the project's progress over the next 2 years, go to www.glasgowmuseums.com/projects

The *Curious* project's ambitions are built on the experience and continued commitment to engaging with Glasgow's diverse citizens and the work initiated in projects such as *Sanctuary*.

LAST WORDS

The success of *Sanctuary* led to GoMA running 3 further Biennial Contemporary Arts and Human Rights programmes, tackling current and often controversial issues such as Violence against Women, Sectarianism and LGBTI rights and representation.

The working practice established through these programmes has been developed, reviewed and reflected on and has become central to the ethos of the gallery. Going forward, we are looking at new challenges. The audiences at GoMA are broader and more diverse as a result of the Contemporary Arts and Human rights programmes. They have enabled GoMA and Glasgow to see work from internationally

acclaimed artists as well as generating a dialogue through art with our new and long-standing communities on issues that affect all of us in our contemporary world.



Sanctuary: the project. These participants from Cranhill Community Project worked with an artist in their local community centre. Copyright: Culture and Sport Glasgow (Museums)